OBITUARIES

Ex-New Orleans DA Garrison, advanced JFK conspiracy idea

By Bruce Lambert
The New York Times

Jim Garrison, who as district attorney in New Orleans made startling assertions of a widespread conspiracy and cover-up in President John F. Kennedy's assassination, died Wednesday at his home in New Orleans. He was 70. The New Orleans coroner, Dr. Frank Minyard, a longtime friend, said the exact cause of death would be determined at a routine autopsy today. Garrison had been bedridden with heart disease.

His widely disputed accusations, which were portrayed in the recent hit film "JFK," drew worldwide attention when he first made them in 1967. He asserted that Lee Harvey Oswald, whom the federal Warren Commission identified as the lone assassin in the president's 1963 death, was not the villain and "never fired a shot."

Announcing that he had "solved the assassination," Garrison accused anti-communist and anti-Castro extremists in the CIA of plotting Kennedy's death to thwart an easing of tension with the Soviet Union and Cuba, and to prevent a retreat from Vietnam.

In 1969 he prosecuted Clay Shaw, a businessman, as a conspirator. But the 34-day trial was widely described as a circus, and the jury acquitted Shaw after deliberating less than an hour.

Many public officials and assassination experts dismissed Garrison's theories as bizarre, irresponsible and an effort to get publicity. But interest in his accusations continued among assassination buffs as doubts grew about the accuracy and completeness of the official findings.

In December, Garrison burst back into national prominence with the release of Oliver Stone's movie "JFK."

The movie, based largely on Garrison's views, portrays Garrison as a quixotic hero fighting an evil establishment involving the government, the military, the mob, politicians and spies. Garrison was portrayed by Kevin Costner.

Jim Garrison
Film 'JFK' drew on his theories

Garrison served as an adviser on the film, which relied heavily on "On the Trail of Assassins," one of three books he wrote about the case. He also landed an acting role in the film, playing Chief Justice Earl Warren.

The period between the original events and the revival provoked by the "JFK" film were troubled years for Garrison. Initially he sought to try Shaw on new perjury charges, but the courts stopped him from proceeding.

Then in 1973, Garrison himself was indicted on federal charges of taking bribes to protect illegal pinball gambling. Conducting his own defense, he won acquittal.

But the trial hurt his bid for a fourth term as New Orleans district attorney. He lost that campaign, ending his 12 years in that office. The victor was Harry Connick Sr., father of musician Harry Connick Jr.

Next, Garrison ran for state Supreme Court judge, and lost.

But in 1978, he won election as a judge on Louisiana's Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit. He remained there until 1991, when he quit because of failing health.

Several students of the assassination said that even though Garrison's investigation may have been flawed, he served as a positive force in focusing attention on the inadequacies of the Warren Commission and in pressing for the release of many still-confidential documents.

Garrison was born in Dennison, Iowa. He was named James C. Garrison but formally changed it to Jim Garrison. He was a graduate of Tulane University Law School.

He served in the National Guard, Army and Army Reserve and served in Europe during World War II and was on active duty briefly in 1951.

Garrison first was elected district attorney in 1962. As the first local politician to make effective use of television, he made frequent raids on French Quarter vice dens and gambling joints, accompanied by an entourage of cameras, technicians and reporters.

He is survived by his wife, the former Leah Elizabeth Ziegler; three sons; two daughters; a sister and one grandchild.